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ABSTRACT

This paper contains an examination of equity theory, which is based on the assumption that when a state of equity exists in an exchange situation, there is a perceived balance between the effort and reward ratios of the individuals involved in the exchange. The paper offers a rationale for examining equity theory in a communication context, presents an extended review of related literature, and provides suggestions for future research. (Author/FL)

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Equity Theory: A Viable Research Area

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This paper contains an explanation of equity theory, a rationale for examining it in a communication context, an extensive review of the overreward literature, and suggestions for future research.

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Equity Theory: A Viable Research Area

As a social animal, man engages in a variety of social interactions (often motivated by the need to develop social relationships) through the medium of communication behavior. Proponents of social exchange theory contend that an exchange of rewards is built into such interaction (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961).

Examples of reward exchange in social interactions include bargaining over the price of services, and when friends or lovers exchange favors or gifts (Kahn, 1971). Research from social psychology indicates that humans have a penchant for maintaining a balanced state, real or psychological, in their social exchange relationships. For individuals to be satisfied with the distribution of rewards in a direct exchange, it is necessary that they accept the role of distributive justice, which is one aspect of equity theory (Homans, 1976). In other words, they must believe that rewards ought to be distributed in a fashion proportional to the contributions made by the parties involved (Homans, 1976). Moreover, Homans (1976) points out that the individuals involved must agree regarding the kind of inputs and outcomes which should be considered when applying the rule, and the individuals involved must agree on their evaluation of the amount of input each has contributed as well as the quantity of outcome each will receive. Research in equity theory supports Homans' contentions by demonstrating that individuals expect to share equally in the reward if they have contributed equally in their efforts to secure the reward (Austin, Walster and Utne, 1976; Leventhal, 1976).

How humans react when they are confronted with an imbalanced social exchange has been explored by proponents of equity theory. The importance

of understanding this need for balanced interaction has been demonstrated by a variety of research based activities in recent years. (1) Publications on equity theory have shown an annual growth rate of an exponential nature with no indication of the interest subsiding. (2) The annual number of new authors writing in the field is also growing at an increasing rate. (3) Current research includes an initial emphasis on monetary exchange relationships, along with additional experimentation related to other social relationships. (4) Results of experimentation examining major derivations of the original theory have led to corrections and expansions of equity theory (Adams and Freedman, 1976).

While communication researchers have long been interested in cognitive dissonance as a research area, it is only recently that we have begun to explore the possibilities of the related area, equity theory. Communication can be considered a common form of social interaction in which a direct exchange occurs. The dyad is the smallest interaction unit in which direct social exchange can occur. Thus, a dyadic communication setting is an ideal context for investigating interpersonal inequity. However, it appears that Spell (1976) and Parks (1977) were the first to examine equity theory propositions in relation to interpersonal communication tasks. Both Spell (1976) and Parks (1977) suggest avenues for additional research on interpersonal inequity. Pritchard (1969) and other equity theory researchers have also suggested a number of areas which need further research.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an explanation of equity theory, review the pertinent literature, and provide suggestions for future research.

Background and Definition of Equity Theory

Equity theory, which was developed by Adams (1963, 1965) and more recently extended by Walster, Berscheid and Walster (1973) to interpersonal interactions, is a special case of cognitive dissonance theory. The substance of equity theory is that when an individual (Person) is in a social situation with another (Other), Person is more comfortable if his inputs (behaviors and traits which Person feels are deserving of reward) and outcomes (rewards) are comparable with those of Other. In such a relationship a state of equity is said to exist (Adams, 1963, 1965; Lawler, III, 1968; Thomas, 1973). Moreover, the inherent dynamics which occur when Person feels that she/he has not been justly rewarded for her/his efforts (Adams, 1963, 1965; Pritchard, 1969; Sussman, 1975) are specified by equity theory.

Twelve years of equity theory research have produced published studies by over 170 different investigators (Adams and Freedman, 1976). In 1973 these efforts culminated in a plea (Walster, Berscheid and Walster, 1973) that equity theory be expanded into a major social psychological theory. Adams and Freedman (1976) indicate that the works of Walster, Berscheid, and Walster (1973) have made significant contributions toward this end.

Although equity theory postulates are coming into their own as important social psychological concerns, the origins of equity theory are linked to social exchange theory (, 1963, 1965; Blau, 1970; Homans, 1961). Under social exchange theory, there is an exchange of rewards whenever two or more persons engage in a social relationship (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). The rationale for this postulate is that

such a relationship requires that both parties relinquish some individual goals in order to acquire other benefits through their mutual association. Thus, social exchange theory postulates that individuals select a course of action after having carefully considered the possible costs and rewards of the exchange (Blau, 1970).

Although careful consideration is given to possible alternatives, one may still feel that she/he has not been justly rewarded for her/his efforts. When this occurs, the relationship may not be perceived as equitable by one or more members of the exchange. Thus, when the results of the social exchange are weighed against the aforementioned criteria for distributive justice, the problem moves from social exchange theory to equity theory as the basis for explanation (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1976).

Adams (1965) originally labeled his theory "a theory of inequity" (p. 280) because the emphasis of the theory revolves around states of inequity and strategies which may be used to reduce feelings of inequity. Whether a social exchange is considered equitable or inequitable depends upon the individuals' perceptions of the relationship between their inputs and outcomes (Adams, 1963, 1965; Adams and Freedman, 1976; Walster, Berscheid and Walster, 1973). A state of perceived equity occurs when Person perceives her/his inputs as balanced with her/his outcomes and when Person perceives Other's inputs as balanced with Other's outcomes (Pritchard, 1969). Equity theory postulates further state that equity exists even if Person perceives that her/his own inputs and outcomes do not balance, providing Other is perceived as not having her/his inputs and outcomes in balance (Pritchard, 1969).

Although most of the research on equity theory centers around the ratio of inputs to outcomes in situations where the individuals are in a direct exchange with one another, Adams (1965) points out that the rewards (outcomes) can be awarded by a third party. Such a situation would occur if Person and Other are both in an exchange situation with an employer. In this case Person and Other each expect the employer to maintain a balanced ratio of inputs to outcomes among her/himself, Person and Other (Adams, 1965).

Adams (1965) maintains that a state of equity exists only when $\frac{O_p}{I_p} = \frac{O_a}{I_a}$ where O = the sum of all outcomes, I = the sum of all inputs, p = person, and a = Other. Thus, a state of inequity results if $\frac{O_p}{I_p} > \frac{O_a}{I_a}$ or $\frac{O_p}{I_p} < \frac{O_a}{I_a}$.

According to equity theory postulates, when a state of inequity is perceived, the participants will experience an unpleasant emotional state (Homans, 1976; Lerner, Miller & Holmes, 1976; Pritchard, 1969). This distressing state will move the participants to take action to restore equity (Austin & Walster, 1974a) or to reduce inequity (Lawler, III, 1968). This contention is supported by the research of Ross and McMillen (1973), and Austin and Walster (1973). Equity theory postulates that a state of inequity causes feelings of distress in both the victim and the beneficiary of the inequitable act (Adams, 1965; Adams & Freedman, 1976; Austin & Walster, 1974b; Blumstein & Weinstein, 1969; Homans, 1976).

Weick and Nesset (1968) indicate that three kinds of inequity can occur. When Person's (P's) ratio of inputs and outcomes is not equal to the inputs and outcomes of Other (O), but P's own inputs and outcomes are in balance "comparison inequity" occurs. A second type of inequity occurs when P's inputs and outcomes are not in balance; this is "own inequity." Finally, "own-comparison inequity" is achieved if P's own input-outcome ratio is not in balance and if it is also unequal to O's input-outcome ratio. Weick and Nesset (1968) use the following notation to indicate these three kinds of inequity: (1) LL, HL, (2) HL, and (3) HL, HH where L = low and H = high. The first letter refers to inputs, the second to outcomes. The first pair of letters refer to P's ratio, the second to O's ratio.

Thus, equity theory is based on the assumption that when a state of equity exists in an exchange situation, there is a perceived balance between the effort and reward ratios of P and O. Inequity occurs when this perceived balance is upset. The inequitable situation results in feelings of distress in both P and O. This distress motivates one or both parties to find a way to restore perceived equity, or at least to reduce the felt inequity. Equity theory predictions are based on a comparison of P's inputs and outcomes with those of O (Leventhal and Michaels, 1969).

Pertinent Theoretical Propositions of Equity Theory

Adams (1965) contends that individuals finding themselves in an inequitable situation will attempt to reduce inequity in one of six ways.

(1) Person may attempt to maximize her/his "positively valent outcomes and the valence of outcomes" (p. 295).

(2) Person may minimize her/his "inputs that are effortful and costly to change" (p. 295).

(3) Person may avoid cognitive and actual changes in those inputs which are basic to her/his self-esteem and self-concept. (Moreover, she/he will resist changes in those outcomes which are central to her/his self-esteem and self-concept.)

(4) Person is more likely to change cognitions regarding Other's inputs and outcomes than she/he is to change cognitions related to her/his own inputs and outcomes.

(5) Person will leave the field only when no other avenue for inequity reduction is available. (She/he may, however, partially withdraw in cases where inequity is perceived to be minor.)

(6) Person may change her/his object of comparison (O) however, this is rarely done. Walster, Berscheid and Walster (1973) indicate that P's choices in an inequitable relationship boil down to either restoring actual equity or restoring psychological equity (Lerner, Miller and Holmes, 1976). When a relationship is highly inequitable, a great deal of distress is experienced by the participants. In such a case the participants will make a great deal of effort to restore equity (Walster, Berscheid and Walster, 1973).

Equity vs. Equality

Some research on equity theory has indicated an interest in the

distinction between an equal and equitable division of rewards (Austin, Walster and Utne, 1976; Kahn, 1971, 1972; Lerner, Miller and Holmes, 1976; Leventhal, 1976). Because this distinction is now being made, it is necessary to specify the difference between the two means of reward allocation.

Equity. Equity theory postulates indicate that the allocator of outcomes distributes them in proportion to the inputs of the social exchange members (Leventhal, 1976; Lane & Messe, 1971; Lane, Messe & Phillips, 1971; Leventhal & Michaels, 1969, 1971). An equitable division of outcomes is based on distributive or equity justice (Homans, 1976).

Equality. However, when all the outcomes of an exchange are allocated equally regardless of the inputs of the members involved in the social exchange situation, the rewards have been distributed according to parity--a second type of justice (Lerner, Miller & Holmes, 1976).

The research of Bales (1950) and Lerner (1974) suggests that when the allocator of the reward is also a co-recipient in a direct exchange situation, she/he may distribute the rewards according to parity. This is particularly true if the allocator wishes to maintain group solidarity or harmony among or between the members of the social exchange situation and if her/his own inputs were greater than those of O (Levental, 1976). When favorable interpersonal relationships are important, research seems to indicate that the use of parity justice encourages harmony and a high level of satisfaction among those involved (Deutsch, 1953; Julian & Perry, 1967; Smith & Cook, 1973; Steiner, 1972). Kahn (1971, 1972) found subjects who liked their social exchange partners preferred to divide rewards equally rather than equitably. Indeed, his study revealed

that the subjects felt that equal division of outcomes was more fair than equitable division (Kahn, 1971, 1972). The results of Morgan and Sawyer (1967) and Leventhal and Michaels (1969) also support the notion that there is a preference among high school students to maintain equality rather than equity.

Equity and equality are not synonyms and research may error by assuming that they are. Moreover, research findings suggest that people function according to one norm or the other as a result of a variety of conditions. It behooves the researcher to consider carefully what she/he wishes to determine and design her/his study to avoid contamination by elements of the other norm.

Equity and Equality. There are situations when the desire for equity is not in conflict with the desire for equality. Both Homans (1976) and Leventhal (1976) agree that when the inputs of P and O are equal or extremely similar for the same or similar tasks, the reward is generally divided equally. However, since the inputs were the same both distributive and parity justice dictate that the outcomes should be the same. In such cases the ratio of the inputs and outcomes of P and O are at the same time proportional and in balance, and whether they were allocated on the basis of the equity norm or the equality norm becomes a moot question. The net result indicates that such a distribution of rewards satisfied the requirement of both norms.

The reduction of inequity (or the restoration of equity) due to overreward has been investigated more successfully when it has been possible to keep the inputs equal (Thomas, 1973) and manipulate the outcomes. Equity postulates indicate that inequity occurs whenever the

inputs and outcomes of P and O are not proportional.

Accordingly, there are two reward conditions which can lead to feelings of inequity, underreward and overreward. The underreward condition is only briefly treated in this paper. For a more complete review of the pertinent literature see Spell's (1976) dissertation.

Underreward

The underreward condition in equity theory can occur in three ways, when P perceives: (1) her/his outcomes to be less than her/his outputs; (2) her/his inputs the same as O's inputs, but her/his own outcomes less than O's; and (3) her/his inputs greater than O's inputs, but her/his outcomes the same as O's. In such cases P is frequently referred to as the "victim" and O as the "harmdoer." Although both the victim and the harmdoer experience feelings of distress attributed to the underreward inequity condition, much greater distress is experienced by the victim (Homans, 1976).

If P experiences inequity because she/he has been underrewarded, she/he may attempt to restore either "real" equity or "psychological" equity. There are four ways P may attempt to restore real equity. (1) Person may reduce her/his inputs (Dunnette, 1973). (2) She/he may attempt to seek restitution (Austin & Walster, 1974; Leventhal & Bergman, 1969; Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973) by attempting to increase her/his outcomes (Dunnette, 1973). (3) She/he may attempt to alter the inputs or (4) the outcomes of O as a means of retaliation (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973). Moreover, if P perceives the inequity to be intentional, she/he will be quick to seek a fair redistribution of the rewards (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973).

If it is impossible to restore real equity, P will attempt to restore psychological equity to a situation where she/he has been underrewarded. This attempt will necessitate some form of cognitive distortion. Person can distort her/his perception of her/his balance of inputs and outcomes so that she/he sees her/his outcomes as proporitonal to her/his inputs (Leventhal & Lane, 1970). She/he may distort O's ratio of inputs to outcomes so that they appear proportional (Leventhal & Lane, 1970; Adams, 1965). Person may engage in task enhancement so that she/he perceives her/his total outcome as greater than her/his net total input (Dunnette, 1973). Furthermore, when P is a victim she/he may even accept and justify the fact that she/he has been exploited (Austin & Walster, 1974; Jecker & Landy, 1969; Austin & Walster, 1974, abstract). Finally, P may derogate O (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973).

Person has three additional options for attempting to reduce inequity. Person can try to force O to leave the field, leave the field her/himself, or change her/his comparison person (Adams, 1965).

Other will make an effort to restore real equity by making restitution to P when this is a possible course of action (Austin & Walster, 1974; Berscheid & Walster, 1967). When restitution is not possible, O will tend to rationalize her/his behavior in an attempt to establish psychological equity (Austin & Walster, 1974). Moreover, research indicates that O will perceive that psychological equity has been restored if P retaliates in a situation where O intentionally underrewarded P (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973).

Overreward

The overreward condition in equity research can occur in three

ways, when P perceives: (1) her/his outcomes as greater than her/his inputs, (2) her/his inputs the same as O's inputs, but her/his own outcomes greater than O; and (3) her/his inputs less than O's input, but her/his outc mes the same as O. The overreward condition in equity theory has been called advantageous or profitable inequity. It is a situation akin to a benefactor-donor, helper-beneficiary, or philanthropist-recipient relationship. There is no direct evidence that P experiences guilt feeling where she/he is overrewarded (Adams & Freedman, 1976). Even so, it is generally agreed that P will be dissatisfied with the relationship (Pritchard, 1969). However, P will not be as distressed by the overreward condition as she/he would be by the underreward condition (Homans, 1976).

If P experiences inequity because she/he has been overrewarded she/he may attempt to restore either real equity or psychological equity. There are three basic ways P may attempt to resore real equity. (1) She/he can increase her/his inputs (Adams & Rosenbaum, 1962; Dunnett, 1973) as long as the increase in inputs does not lead to an increase in outcomes (Garland, 1973). (2) Where it is possible, P may decrease her/his actual outcomes (Dunnett, 1973). (3) If P recognized the over-reward as intentional, she/he may reciprocate O's generosity (Kahn, 1971; Leventhal, Weiss & Long, 1969).

If none of these avenues is open to her/him, P may restore psychological equity by convincing her/himself that the relationship was a fair one (Austin, Walster & Utne, 1976). (1) Person may engage in secondary distortion and over estimate her/his inputs as being either superior or greater in quantity (Homans, 1976; Leventhal, Allen & Kemelgor,

1969), or of greater importance or relevance (Adams, 1965). (2) Person may even cognitively distort her/his outcomes so that she/he perceives them as less important or relevant (Adams, 1965). (3) Leventhal and Lane (1970) indicate that P may cognitively distort the inputs and outcomes of O and her/himself so that she/he (P) sees them as proportional. In general, there are a number of ways P may cognitively distort her/his perception of a fair reward (Gergen, Morse & Bode, 1974). Person will engage in cognitive distortion to justify her/his overreward when it is impossible for her/him to reciprocate or when the only means of restoring real equity are inadequate (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973).

Other means of psychological distortion open to P when she/he is overrewarded include distorting the difficulty of the task in which she/he and O were engaged (Gergen, Morse & Bode, 1974), making plans to reciprocate or compensate O in a future social exchange situation (Leventhal, Allen & Kemelgor, 1969; Leventhal, Reilly & Lehrer, 1964), or resenting her/his benefactor, even to the point of derogating O and perceiving O as unworthy of, or not entitled to reciprocation (Gross, 1972). Finally, P may restore psychological equity by changing her/his perception of her/his job to be less satisfactory than she/he had originally perceived (Dunnette, 1973).

In summary, inequity can be experienced in a number of situations. Person can perceive that she/he was overrewarded or underrewarded in relation to her/his own inputs and outcomes. She/he can feel she/he was overrewarded or underrewarded in relation to the inputs and outcomes of O. In addition, she/he can perceive that the inequity was intentional or accidental. Person can also perceive the relationship to be one in

reward (Berscheid and Walster, 1967; Berscheid, Walster and Barclay, 1969).

Overreward. When monetary rewards were used, participants were asked to allocate or reallocate the money in an attempt to determine how participants would determine the outcomes after they had engaged in some social exchange task. In some studies the confederate allocated or reallocated the reward; the participants' attempts to restore real or psychological equity were then observed. (Adams, 1965; Arrowood, 1961; Austin and Walster, 1974a; Evan and Simmons, 1969; Friedman and Goodman, 1967; Garrett and Libby, 1973; Gergen, Morse and Bode, 1974; Gordon and Lowin, 1965; Hinton, 1972; Kahn, 1972; Lane and Messe, 1972; Lawler III, 1968; Lawler, Koplin, Young and Fadem, 1968; Leventhal, Allen and Kemelgor, 1969; Leventhal, Weiss and Long, 1969; Moore and Baron, 1973; Pritchard, Dunnette and Gorgenson, 1972; Regula, 1969; Thomas, 1973; Wiener, 1970). Neither study using S & H green stamps explored the overreward condition.

Of the studies using grades as a reward, only Parks' (1977) study investigated the overreward condition. She explored how P may distort her/his perceptions of the source valence of O when P is overrewarded in a dyadic communication setting by O. In her study, an equitable state was defined as one in which the inputs and outcomes of P and O were equal rather than only proportional. Thus, inequity was created by keeping the inputs of P and O equal and manipulating the outcomes so that O (the confederate) awarded P a much higher grade for the work of the dyad (HH, HL). P's attempt to restore psychological equity was examined by comparing P's view of O under the equitable and inequitable conditions.

which there is an opportunity to compensate or to retaliate the overreward or underreward. Person, may however, believe that the situation is such that there is no opportunity to restore real equity. In the latter case, P will strive to restore psychological equity by distorting reality in one of a number of ways.

The Reward Conditions

The three types of rewards which have been used in equity research with adults are grades, money and S & H green stamps. Research using the overreward condition will be presented followed by general findings, limitations, and implications.

A majority of the equity theory studies have used money as a reward (Adams, 1963, 1965; Adams and Jacobsen, 1964; Adams and Rosenbaum, 1962; Anderson and Shelly, 1970; Andrews, 1967; Arrowood, 1961; Austin and Walster, 1974a; Callahan and Messe, 1973; Cohen, 1974; Evan and Simmons, 1969; Friedman and Goodman, 1967; Garland, 1973; Garrett and Libby, 1973; Gergen, Morse and Bode, 1974; Gordon and Lowin, 1965; Hinton, 1972; Jecker and Landy, 1969; Kahn, 1971, 1972; Lane and Messe, 1971, 1972; Lane, Messe and Phillips, 1971; Lawler III, 1968; Lawler, Koplin, Young and Fadem, 1968; Lawler and O'Gara, 1967; Leventhal, Allen and Kemelgor, 1969; Leventhal and Bergman, 1969; Leventhal and Lane, 1970; Leventhal and Michaels, 1969, 1971; Leventhal, Weiss and Long, 1969; Messe, Vallacher and Phillips, 1975; Moore and Baron, 1973; Pritchard, Dunnette and Gorgenson, 1972; Regula, 1969; Schmitt and Marwell, 1972; Thomas, 1973; Wiener, 1970). Only three studies were found in which grades were used as a reward (Parks, 1977; Spell, 1976; Leventhal and Whiteside, 1973), and two studies employing women as subjects used S & H green stamps as a

Findings. The monetary studies cited above generally support equity theory predictions about the overreward condition. In order to make a discussion of the findings easier to follow, they have been grouped into three categories: distribution behavior, perceptual changes, and attitudes.

The findings related to distribution behavior in the overreward condition are not consistent. Some studies have reported results which support equity propositions. These studies found that Ps:

(1) who were intentionally overrewarded decreased their share of the reward more than Ps who were overrewarded by chance; and

(2) who were overrewarded and who had no chance to restore real equity anticipated changes in their future behavior toward O by indicating that they intended to give a greater share of the reward to O in the future. However, other studies have reported findings which are in conflict with equity propositions. These studies found that Ps:

a) who were previously overrewarded demonstrated a bias toward distributing the bonus in accord with equality;

b) who were overrewarded by chance allocated the bonus equally; and

c) who were overrewarded in a situation where self-interest and equitable behavior were in conflict distributed the rewards in keeping with protecting their self-interest.

The findings related to perceptual changes occurring when P is overrewarded tend to support equity propositions. Persons:

(1) who were classified according to their own perceptions of

their qualifications produced more work when they judged themselves qualified than did Ps who perceived themselves as unqualified;

(2) who were overrewarded in relation to their qualifications distorted their perceptions of their qualifications to meet the reward;

(3) who were overrewarded perceived their work as more important than Ps who were underrewarded;

(4) who were overrewarded in their own estimation by 40% to 80% distorted their perceptions of the difficulty of the task and of what a fair reward was; and

(5) who were greatly overrewarded by O perceived that O had the greater control over the reward allocation.

The findings related to P's attitude when P has been overrewarded are somewhat ambiguous. Some studies tend to support equity propositions. These studies found that Ps who were overrewarded:

(1) scored higher on desire to improve their competency; and

(2) were less satisfied with their job.

However, other studies are not consistent in their findings regarding P's attitude toward O when P has been overrewarded. Persons who were over rewarded:

(1) in comparison to O, whom they had previously helped, liked O more than when they were underrewarded;

(2) were more satisfied if O had been previously overrewarded than if O had been previously equitably rewarded;

(3) did not feel their overreward was more fair when O had been

previously overrewarded than when O had been previously equitably rewarded, and

(4) did not change their perceptions of O's source valence when P had been previously equitably rewarded.

Limitations. Although there is some evidence that personality variables may account for some differences in the way P reacts to inequitable situations (Aronfreed, 1961; Blumstein and Weinstein, 1969; Cohen, 1974; Friedman and Goodman, 1967; Glass, 1964; Glass and Wood, 1969; Lawler III, 1968; Lawler and O'Gara, 1967; Schwartz, 1968; Tornow, 1971; Walster, Berscheid and Walster, 1973; Weinstein, Devaughn and Wiley, 1969), only one attempt was made to consider such variables (Parks, 1977). Several studies attempted to lower or raise self-esteem by telling P that she/he was unqualified or overqualified for the job she/he was to perform, but no attempt was made to verify the actual lowering or raising of P's self-esteem (Adams and Jacobsen, 1964; Anderson and Shelly, 1970; Friedman and Goodman, 1967; Lawler, Koplin, Young and Fadem, 1968; Moore and Baron, 1973; Wiener, 1970). It is possible that these studies have been contaminated by lower self-esteem or a set to increase the quality of the input. Parks (1977) investigated whether the variable of locus of control would have an effect on P's perception of O's source valence by comparing P's responses to O under the equitable and inequitable conditions. P's locus of control did not appear to effect how P perceived O. Unfortunately, she used Ps who scored within the full range of external and internal categories. Most of the locus of control research indicates that differences in behavior attributed to one's locus of control tend to be more pronounced when one considers

data from only those who score at the extremes of the Rotter Internal External Control Scale (RIECS) (Parks, 1977).

Research Possibilities

Although this research indicates that P may attempt to reduce overreward inequity by a variety of psychological distortions, no clear picture emerges regarding how P may distort her/his perceptions of O. In fact, there are some conflicting findings.

There is evidence from reactance theory and attribution theory (Brehm and Cole, 1966; Gross and others, 1973; Jones and Davis, 1966; Kelley, 1967) that a P may derogate O if she/he is given help which she/he cannot reciprocate. Moreover, if the recipient of overreward is unable to reciprocate, she/he is more likely to justify, her/his overreward (Walster, Berscheid and Walster, 1973). The question remains, exactly how will P justify her/his overreward inequity when she/he has no means of reciprocating O? If P derogates O, as suggested by Gross (1973), what attributes of O will P derogate?

Spell (1976) investigated how a victim distorts her/his initial perceptions of her/his exploiter on nine dimensions of source valence. Spell (1976) found that in the underreward inequity condition, P lowered her/his initial perception rating of O on the dimensions of competence, sociability and similarity of attitudes. He also found that P's self-esteem rating had no significant relationship to the changes in P's perceptions of O.

Parks' (1977) study appears to be the only empirical study which attempted to determine how P would perceive O after P had been over-

rewarded. The results of this study did not support equity theory propositions which indicate that when P is overrewarded she/he will reduce her/his feelings of inequity by distorting her/his perceptions of O (Homans, 1976; Pritchard, 1969). In this study P and O were strangers. Data collected via the debriefing form, and from the post-experimental debriefing sessions held in the classes from which the participants were drawn, indicate that the participants: (1) were not aware of the true nature of the experiment; (2) did perceive an inequitable reward condition; (3) were generally concerned that O had given herself an unjust grade; and (4) at the time of the experiment reported that they experienced some discomfort as a result of the inequity. As they left the experimental setting, almost all Ps in the overreward inequity condition attempted to have O explain to them why she had given herself a lower grade.

It appears from the debriefing data that P felt she/he had earned the grade she/he received from O. Based on the debriefing data, it is unlikely that P engaged in secondary distortion by overestimating her/his inputs, as Homans (1976), Leventhal, Allen and Kemelgor (1969) and Adams (1965) suggest. The debriefing data suggest that P felt both she/he and O had earned the same grade; however, P did not understand why O had awarded herself a lower grade. Since the inputs were indeed kept equal, P's perception of the situation is a justifiable one. Person obviously viewed the situation as one in which O equitably rewarded P, but underrewarded herself! In effect, P experienced what Wieck and Nesset (1968) call "comparison inequity." This being the case, P's self-interest becomes of paramount concern to P. Since she/he perceived an equitable reward for her/his input, she/he had no quarrel with O; she/he is simply

curious. Perhaps the General Semantist's claim that "in matters of escaping our attention, the obvious is often a rival of the obscure," is a point well taken. It is reasonable that P would not feel that she/he had been overrewarded in this situation. Moreover, since P and O were strangers and unlikely to meet or work together again, it is understandable that P would not experience enough stress as a result of the experimental condition to warrant distorting her/his perceptions of O.

Parks interpreted her findings as being significant empirical contributions to equity theory. Until future empirical research demonstrates otherwise, it appears reasonable to conclude that although P may perceive a "comparison inequity" situation, P may not attempt to restore psychological equity by distorting her/his perceptions of O. However, the following conditions must exist for the formulation of this conclusion: (1) P and O must be strangers interacting in a dyadic direct exchange situation, (2) P must be overrewarded by O.

In such an overreward situation, whether P actually perceives the situation as "comparison inequity" is open to question. Perhaps such an overreward situation is "comparison inequity" only by definition. If overreward "comparison inequity" does indeed exist, P may or may not attempt to restore psychological equity by one of the other means available to him.

Because of the dearth of empirical studies examining the overreward condition, many questions regarding equity theory remain unanswered. Most of the research considering overreward has been limited to how P reallocates rewards when P has been overrewarded. Further research is

needed on how P attempts to restore psychological equity when P has been overrewarded, if indeed she/he does.

A plausible area of investigation for underreward as well as overreward inequity appears to be one's tolerance for inequitable situations. Scant research appears to support the general notion that P is more concerned when she/he has been underrewarded than when she/he has been overrewarded. Is the folk wisdom, "People repay small favors, acknowledge middling ones, and repay large favors with ingratitude" supported by experimental data? One's general tolerance for inequity does not appear to have been explored.

There is room to consider investigating overreward inequity and whether P attempts to restore psychological equity by distorting her/his perceptions of O's source valence, under the condition of "own inequity" (Weick and Nesset, 1968). An "own inequity" condition could be created by manipulating P's inputs and outcomes so they would not be in balance (LH). Furthermore, "own-comparison inequity" (Weick and Nesset, 1968) could be examined in an overreward condition to determine whether P would attempt to restore psychological equity by distorting her/his perceptions of O's source valence. This could be accomplished by manipulating P's inputs and outcomes so they would not be in balance, and manipulating the situation so that P's input-outcome ratio would also be unequal to O's input-outcome ratio (LH, HL).

Parks (197) used participants who did not know one another. Although it would be considerably more difficult, it would be valuable to examine overreward inequity between participants who were acquainted with one another, and between participants who were friends. Pritchard

(1969) predicts that the degree of intimacy between P and O will affect the amount of felt inequity. It is quite probable that P would experience greater discomfort if she/he were overrewarded by an acquaintance, and would experience the greatest discomfort if she/he were overrewarded by a friend. From real world observations, one would expect that this would be particularly true if P were not allowed to restore real equity. Under these conditions, it would be interesting to determine whether P would attempt to restore psychological equity by distorting her/his perceptions of O's source valence.

Another area for investigating overreward inequity remains unexamined. Pritchard (1969) suggests that one investigate how P will react when she/he is in an inequitable situation involving a third person who is responsible for allocating the rewards. He predicts that when P is in a face-to-face LH, LL (or HL) condition involving a third party who allocates the rewards, P will not experience any dissatisfaction with O. Pritchard (1969) believes that P will transfer her/his feelings of inequity to the third party, and P will not alter her/his own inputs or outcomes. This prediction needs to be tested. Pritchard (1969) also predicts that when P is in a LL, LH condition with someone who is in P's psychological environment, and when the rewards have been allocated by a third party, P will have feelings of inequity toward the third party, not toward O. Pritchard (1969) further predicts that P will attempt to raise her/his outcomes rather than adjust her/his inputs, and rather than attempting to change the inputs or outcomes of O. These predictions also need to be tested. It would be of interest to determine whether under any of these conditions P would distort her/his perceptions of O's, or the

third party's, source valence.

Since P's locus of control has not been examined in any underreward inequity condition, locus of control is a viable personality variable to consider. Moreover, the present writer is not willing to discount the thesis that P's locus of control has an effect on how P perceives O in an overreward inequitable situation. Further investigation using participants who make extreme ratings of external and internal locus of control on the RIECS is still a worthwhile pursuit for the researche interested in overreward inequity.

Since oral communication can be viewed as a form of social interaction based upon direct exchange, equity theory should be of interest to the communication researcher. Both the interpersonal and small group communication contexts are fertile grounds for exploring how equity theory propositions relate to communication. One might examine triads, social conversation, male-female communication, and small group satisfaction in terms of equity theory postulates. Furthermore, it would not seem necessary to restrict such research to experimental studies.

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